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ABSTRACT

As many as 40 percent of America's school-aged children are at-risk of failure within the current educational system. Many factors outside of school, such as poverty and debilitating parent and family influences, contribute to student failure. Within the school, the most effective factor of intervention for at-risk students is the individual classroom teacher. The best teachers are not always those with the most content knowledge, but rather those who are willing to risk themselves and care about the whole child. Schools that have diversity in curriculum, an adequate support staff, and a variety of student extra-curricular activities, yet are small in size generally are more effective with those students who do not achieve. The size of student population is of most importance within the individual classroom. The fewer students assigned to an individual teacher, the greater the opportunities for effective intervention strategies to deal with the marginal student. Efforts to provide marginal students with appropriate educational opportunities should include parents, the community, educational leaders, teachers, and the student. A key element for the success of all students is encouraging positive self-image. Labeling, grouping, and retaining students create the development of educational push-outs, students who are forced out of the system. The rural educator can take advantage of the small numbers and the sense of community to meet the needs of at-risk students. Contains 50 end notes and 5 tables. (KS)

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Just Take Your Time and Keep it Between the Lines

Rural Education and the At-Risk Student

Not all students have the necessary abilities to be successful within a written test driven curriculum. They often come to the conclusion that there must be something wrong with them. After all the other students seem to be able to understand the subject, past the test and progress through the educational system. Why must they always be the one who does not get the idea?

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Missouri Association for Alternative Education

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Just Take Your Time and Keep it Between the Lines: Rural Education and the At-Risk Student

Introduction

It has been a common misconception that rural America is and has been free from those problems of American society, which often provide a negative impact upon the quality of education and society. That drugs, crime, unemployment, families living in poverty, inadequate health care, teenage pregnancy, suicide, etc., are only concerns for urban America and that rural America with its open space and crisp clean air has been spared those debilitating conditions. That simply is not reality. Rural communities suffer from possibility an even great poverty of opportunity. Since the poverty of rural America is not as obvious, and is not concentrated within a limited geographic area, fewer programs from outside tax and private dollars are directed towards rural America.

Those who study demographics have found that although the debilitating conditions of modern America are not as obvious in rural areas, that many of those conditions affect a greater percentage of the population within rural areas. Educators are fully aware that although small schools provide a greater sense of belonging and involvement. Yet,

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often those school are unable to provide the variety of content instruction which is often available to students in larger schools. Educators can and do discuss which of those elements is the most important; a sense of community and common achievement often present in the smaller school, or the wealth of opportunity and variety of content available in the larger school. Ideally a school which can offer both will produce the better prepared student who in turn will become the most productive citizen.

From twenty-five to forty percent of America's students are not receiving a quality education. A full twenty-five percent often fall within a category referred to as students who are at-risk with failure. That is not always the educators fault. But, educators must be concerned about how to improve the quality of the educational experience for all of their students. Many children come from a home and community environment that both fails to prepare and then to encourage children in their quest for an education.

A 1988 report funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation reported findings from a national survey on at-risk youth that no state had a comprehensive policy addressing school-age at-risk youth.(1) Presently there has been a great amount of rhetoric but little commitment and action to fund the necessary elements of successful educational programs. The level of federal funding has been reduced over the last decade. The reduction in financial support has resulted in limited ability to provide services to an increasing at-risk population. Presently federal funds only provide services to one out of five low-income children who need preschool education; two out of five in need of educational remediation;

one out of four in need of bilingual education; and one out of every twenty in need of job training assistance.(2)

The problem is much larger than the educational system and America's educators. It is a social problem for the entire nation. The future of the nation is dependent upon the quality of education provided for all its citizens. Not just those who are capable, motivated and interested in obtaining an education. Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, served as chairman of the National Commission on Children. The report of the National Commission on Children concluded:

> "Too many of today's children and adolescents will reach adulthood unhealthy, illiterate, unemployable, lacking moral direction and a vision of a secure future. This is a personal tragedy for the young people involved and a staggering loss for the nation as a whole. We must begin today to place children and their families at the top of the national agenda."(3)

Until there is a commitment from all elements within the American society there will continue to be a segment of America's future unprepared for survival in the modern economy and thus condemned to subsistence living. Persistence to graduation within four years by incoming freshmen is at about seventy percent.(4) As a nation, the United States can no longer consider one fourth of its future as throwaway or disposable. The United States is part of a world economy that will not allow a nation to compete successfully with less than seventy-five percent of its citizens properly educated. The immediate future demands even more. By the year 2000, a college education will be a requirement for as many as two-thirds of all new jobs.(5)

In the Lives of USA's Children

Every day in the USA:

2,795 teens (women under 20 get pregnant.
372 teens miscarry
1,106 teens have abortions
1,295 teens give birth
689 babies are born to women who have had inadequate parental care
719 babies are born at low birthweight (less than 5 lbs 8 oz)
129 babies are born at very low birthweight (less than 3 lbs 5 oz)
67 babies die before one month of life
105 babies die before their first birthday
27 children die from poverty
10 children are killed by guns
30 children are wounded by guns
6 teen-agers commit suicide
135,000 children bring a gun to school
7,742 teen-agers become sexually active
623 teen-agers get syphilis or gonorrhea
211 children are arrested for drug abuse
437 children are arrested for drinking or drunken driving
1,512 teenagers drop out of school
1,849 children are abused or neglected
3,288 children run away from home
1,629 children are in adult jails
2,556 children are born out of wedlock
2,989 children see their parents divorced
34,285 people lose jobs

Source: Children's Defense Fund.

Who is At-Risk?

Within the classroom, any student who is not working up to their potential, may already be at-risk or may become at-risk with failure. Students are at-risk when they are unable to take advantage of the available educational opportunities. A number of students, in America today are also at-risk because their educational resources and opportunities are inherently unequal. At least thirty percent of America's current school age children are at-risk and thus have become educationally disadvantaged.(6)

Over the last few years the rate of persistence to graduation has remained in the area of seventy to seventy-five percent. The twenty-five to thirty percent who do not complete a high school education on time are generally considered as students at-risk. Unfortunately about as many students remain in school and graduate on time, but do not receive a quality education, because they do not have either the internal or external motivation to work up to their potential. Those students are also at-risk with failure within the current educational system. As many as forty percent of America's school aged children are at-risk of failure within the current educational system.

Factors That Contribute to Student Failure

The majority of students enter school wanting to learn. They become at-risk with failure within America's schools as a result of a variety of conditions over which they often do not have any control. Many of the factors which have contributed to the development of educationally disadvantaged at-risk students, during the last quarter of a century, are external and not internal factors.

Poverty

Poverty is the most common predictor among educationally disadvantaged at-risk students within the American educational system. Children are currently the poorest Americans.(7) It is a disappointing fact that poverty among children is currently on the rise. That is an unfortunate reversal of the progress that had been made against poverty within the American society. The rate of children living in poverty was at 20.6 percent in 1959. With the emphasis upon "The War on Poverty," as a major effort of "The Great Society" during the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, the poverty rate for children declined to its lowest point of 9.7 percent in 1969.(8) By 1974 children had replaced the elderly as the poorest age group. Childhood poverty has continued to become more abject and widespread. Government statistics revealed almost fourteen million children were living in poverty by 1983 and that more than half of those children lived with their mothers in a single-parent home.(9) Almost five million children live within families that have a combined income which is less than one half of the current federal poverty level.(10)

"Poverty robs children of their childhood. . . But a child need not be economically poor to be impoverished in America today. A poverty of spirit touches every child, at whatever income level, who does not receive the time, attention and guidance he or she needs and wants from parents and other caring adults. Many of these children are lonely, isolated and insecure. They are often vulnerable to a subculture of alienation, recklessness, and damaging, antisocial behavior. A poverty of hope afflicts every child who feels unwanted and unvalued, whose customary experiences are of rejection and failure. For these children, failure is a vicious cycle that begins early and convinces them that competence and achievement are beyond their reach. A poverty of opportunity affects every child whose education is inadequate to meet the growing demands of a changing work place and whose exposure to cultural enrichment and constructive involvement in his or her community is limited. For all these children, rich and poor alike, the future holds little promise."(11)

1989 Estimated Poverty Rates Among Children

Race or Ethnic Background	Two-Parent	All Types	Female-Headed
White	9%	15%	44%
Black	16%	44%	65%
Hispanic	25%	36%	68%

SOURCE: U.S.. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (1990). *Current population reports: Money and income and poverty status, 1989.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, p. 37.

The experiences of children living in poverty impact greatly their ability to be successful at school. The self esteem and dignity of children living in poverty is often insufficient for success in school. They are often deprived of proper nutrition, adequate health services, sanitary living conditions, appropriate clothing and time to be involved with extra curricular activities of the school. Those experiences create emotionally hardened children who often become educationally disadvantaged students. Children of poverty generally do not have the same pre-school educational

opportunities of other more affluent Americans. They come to school without the skills necessary to be ready to learn.

When children of poverty arrive at school, many teachers do not expect as much from them. Thus, they are often given less opportunity to achieve within the school environment. Those children are more frequently subject to criticism from their peers and school officials than other students. As a result, more poor children experience discipline problems within the school environment. They are more likely to be suspended from school or receive physical punishment.(12) Children of poverty are one-third less likely to complete a high school education.(13)

Not all the problems of America's youth and its educational system would disappear if poverty did not have such a strong grip upon large numbers of America's children. But the existence of poverty within the American society creates a host of other problems that make the task of education and survival for children a formidable task. The elimination of poverty is not an inexpensive undertaking, but failure to deal successfully with poverty may be a substantially more expensive experience for the nation, individual states and all taxpayers.

Home and Family

A major disadvantage for many of America's poor is the attitude of their environment; a home and neighborhood that expresses to them that they are worthless and that getting an education will not help them to

become successful. These American citizens often feel helpless and accept an attitude of hopelessness about themselves and their future.

The verbal and non-verbal attitudes expressed by parents have a great influence upon the child's own perceptions and attitudes towards obtaining an education. There are a number of common factors of family background that are powerful predictors of dropout behavior.(14) Children who's parents were themselves; dropouts, teenage parents, lived in poverty, suffered from a low self-esteem, involved in drug and alcohol abuse, etc., are more likely to give up on obtaining an education. The attitudes towards education and the educational attainment of parents are reliable predictors about the potential for a child to complete a high school education. Eighty percent of the fathers and seventy percent of the mothers of high school dropouts had not completed high school. Thirty percent of the fathers and twenty-five percent of the mothers had failed to go beyond a sixth grade education. Two thirds of the parents of dropouts display an indifferent or negative attitude about the value of education.(15)

Educational attainment is a strong indicator of dependency upon the social welfare system. Children and young adults without basic educational skills become part of the social welfare system five times more often than those who are better-educated.(16) The current requirements of social welfare, as enacted in federal and state legislation, does not provide sufficient incentives for the poor to break the cycle of dependence upon the social welfare system. A single female parent who is receiving any of a variety of federal and state welfare assistance is often unable to enter the workforce and provide a productive role model for her children. If such a

person obtains employment at minimum wage, they generally lose all, not some, of their social welfare benefits. Minimum wages will not provide sufficient income for that mother to replace the lost benefits in medical coverage for her children. Nor will it replace food stamps, rent subsidies, etc.

Children of the working poor are in a desperate situation because they do not have access to many of the social services of the federal and state governments. About thirty-five million Americans, including over eight million children do not have any medical insurance coverage. Almost twelve percent of Americans who are above the poverty level do not have any medical insurance. "Despite the existence of such programs as Medicaid and Medicare, 28.6 percent of the poor in 1990 reported that they had no medical insurance of any kind at any time during that year."(17)

There has been a significant rise, during the post World War II era, of working mothers, single parent headed households and the lack of appropriate role models within the home. The number of children living in single parent households has risen dramatically. In 1970 about twelve percent of children lived in single parent households compared to twenty-five percent by 1989.(18) Thus, a greater concern for educators and society in general about the numbers of latchkey children, inappropriate and inadequate child care, along with issues such as the use and abuse of television and other entertainment mediums.

Children from single parent households generally are not as successful in school as those from a two parent household. They are two to three times more likely to suffer with educational problems such as learning or behavioral disabilities or be developmentally delayed.(19) Their dropout rate is twice as high as children from two parent households.(20) Single parent households create children of poverty and children of poverty are more frequently educationally disadvantaged. Single female headed households generally have more children living in poverty than other types of families.

Drug abuse and the resulting crime have become all too accepted as normal within many communities. Increasing numbers of America's youth are unable to escape the ravages of drugs and crime upon their family and peers. New waves of dependent children are making their entrance into the public schools. Children who have been neglected by drug dependent parents and/or are themselves direct victims, such as the crack-cocaine babies. As many as 375,000 babies each year suffer health and developmental problems as a result of alcohol and illegal drug use by pregnant women. About eighty thousand of those children are crack babies. The crack cocaine problem contains serious implications for society, since the number of crack babies is currently ten times as high as the number of heroin addicted children have even been.(21)

Many of today's children are familiar with violent death among their peers. The rate of suicide among America's youth is on the increase. Between 1960 and 1970 the rate of teenage suicide doubled. About five thousand teenagers take their own lives each year. That does not provide

the depth of the problem. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers. Researchers indicate that as many as one hundred attempt suicide for every successful suicide.(22) Drugs, gangs and crime are taking the lives of a record number of children. "Between 1984 and 1988, gunshot deaths increased by over 40 percent, rising 20 percent from 1987 to 1988 alone."(23) Murder is currently the leading cause of death among black male teenagers.(24)

1987 Death Rates Among Teenagers
Deaths per 100,000 population 15-19 years

	Homicide		Suicide	
	Firearms	Non firearms	Firearms	Non firearms
All Teenagers	7.0	2.9	6.1	4.2
White Males	5.1	2.2	11.1	6.6
Black Males	49.2	10.8	6.3	2.6
White Females	1.2	1.8	1.9	2.5
Black Females	7.2	4.8	1.3	1.4

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1989). *Advance data: From vital and health statistics of the National Center for Health Statistics.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, p. 3.

A variety of both public and private sector studies of current trends among the American family point to a future, which may contain a prelude to a tragedy. A tragedy that may create more and more citizens who will

become part of the cycle of dependency. Unfortunately neither the private nor public sectors have taken an effective leadership role to assist society and those dependent citizens with avenues to overcome the debilitating cycle of dependency and hopelessness. Demographic research suggest that for the first time since the great depression many of America's children will not be more financially secure than their parents. Likewise there is evidence that the quality of life [resources - social environment - health services - education - opportunities, etc.] for America's children has begun a disappointing decline.(25)

Inadequate Preschool Opportunities

Children who participate in quality preschool programs, when compared to those without such experiences, are less likely to repeat grades or to be referred to special education classes. They tend to be more motivated to learn and thus they complete high school in larger percentages and experience greater opportunities for successful employment.(26)

Preschool and early childhood education programs are an essential element of adequate preparation of America's children for entry into the formal educational environment. Success in school begins extremely early, within the prenatal period and certainly during the first few months and years of a child's life.(27) The disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds do not receive the same opportunities to attend preschool. Only twenty-one percent who live in families with income below $20,000 attend preschool, compared to fifty-one percent whose family income is above $34,000.(28)

Longitudinal studies of quality preschool programs have provided evidence that early intervention can have long-term impact for the educationally disadvantaged child. Such programs have lowered the need for special programs, and the incidence of delinquency, premature parenthood and the dropping out of school. Programs designed to intervene during the formative years may well be a key to dropout prevention. The goals of parental involvement and development of self confidence among students are more attainable within the preschool years.(29)

During the sixties, America's political leaders sought to improve the conditions of the poor and educationally disadvantaged. In 1965 as a result of those efforts Head Start came into existence. Head Start was designed to provide early socialization and educational opportunities for America's low-income preschool children. The goal of Head Start was to prepare those children for school and to allow them to enter that experience on a more equal level with their more advanced peers. As a means of improving the opportunities of disadvantaged children the program placed emphasis upon the involvement of the parents. Recent studies by the National Governors' Association indicate that as many as one-third of the children meeting the age requirements of kindergarten are not ready to begin school. As many as fifty percent of the children in school may be placed in the first and second grade years ahead of their developmental age.(30)

1990 Participation in Head Start

Age	Children enrolled Head Start	•Income Eligible Children
3	146,051	825,000
4	391,886	825,000
5	37,865	825,000
TOTAL	575,802	2,475,000

• Estimated , based on data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

SOURCE: Administration for Children, Youth and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC, 1991

The first of the six "best bet" strategies offered by the U. S. Department of Education and school superintendents is: "Intervene early." Success in school is determined early, often in the first months and certainly within the first years of life.(31) One of the best opportunities to break the cycle of dependence is early and sustained intervention into the lives of disadvantaged children, both in and out of the school environment.

Is such intervention cost effective? Can our nation and individual states afford the financial cost of intervention into the lives of the growing number of disadvantaged children? The answer to both is Yes. In fact the American nation can not afford to put off such an investment. Every year in which such an investment is delayed the cost of neglect and the future costs escalate. Intervention provides opportunities to prevent problems before they become a crisis. It is the most efficient and cost-effective way to address the needs of educationally disadvantaged children and their

families.(32) Jack MacAllister, Chairman and C-E-O of U. S. West testified about the cost effectiveness of preschool intervention programs, during December 1988, before a hearing of a subcommittee on education and health. He stated: "Research suggests $1 invested in preschool education saves $6 in later social costs and cuts by a third the likelihood of a child one day dropping out of school. The point needs emphasis: the most cost-effective programs focus on early childhood and preschool efforts."(33)

As many as one million high school students drop out of school each year. School dropouts cost the American taxpayer billions in lost local, state and federal tax revenues. School dropouts are three and a half times more likely to be arrested than high school graduates.(34) Eighty percent of America's prison inmates are school dropouts, and each one cost an average of twenty thousand dollars a year to incarcerate.(35) According to the U. S. Department of Commerce, a male student who drops out of school will earn $441,000.00 less during his work life, than a male who obtains a high school diploma.(36)

Premature Parenthood

The statistics on teenage pregnancy in modern America are alarming. Children having children is continuing to create generations of children who will live in poverty and often will not receive the necessary assistance to live a healthy and productive life. As many as twenty-five percent of teenage mothers will become pregnant with their second child

within one year of giving birth to their first child.(37) Almost forty percent of white babies and an alarming ninety percent of black babies are born into teenage single-parent families.(38) Children from poor single-parent families have a greater risk of becoming teenage parents than other children.(39) School dropouts are six times as likely to become unmarried parents than are high school graduates.(40)

The rate of teen pregnancy in the United States is higher than most other industrialized nations. It is twice as high as Canada, Great Britain and France, three times as high as Sweden and seven times as high as the Netherlands.(41) The percentage of live births among unmarried mothers has risen from nearly five percent in 1960 to more than twenty-five percent by 1988.(42) During 1988 almost four thousand babies were born to school-aged adolescents in Missouri.(43)

Teenage Pregnancy in Missouri, 1988

Age	No. of live Births	
12	5	
13	27	
14	140	3 had 2nd child
15	479	30 had 2nd child
16	1,131,	107 had 2nd child / 11 had 3rd child
17	2,066	306 had 2nd child / 43 had 3rd child
TOTAL	**3,848**	

Source: Missouri Department of Health, State Center for Health Statistics

In addition to the social and emotional cost of premature parenthood, and its impact upon the family structure, there is also a considerable drain on the tax dollars of local, state and national governments. Society not only pays for the birth of a baby through Medicaid, but then begins a long term commitment for that child. More than fifty percent of teenage mothers will spend a number of years on social welfare. Over fifty percent of the welfare cost in the United States is created by families in which the mother was a teenage parent.(44) Preventative measures are more cost effective than attempts to deal with the health problems of the new infant. Prenatal care costs as little as six hundred dollars per person. But failure to invest in adequate prenatal care can result in intensive care cost, for a premature infant, in excess of one thousand dollars a day.(45)

Premature parenthood will continue to plague society with financial costs and children who have difficulty becoming a productive part of society, unless political leaders and school officials become motivated to seek answers to the conditions which contribute to the growing number of teenagers who become parents. Such action may well have a financial obligation for start up, but most longitudinal studies, like those dealing with Head Start services indicate that such costs are often greatly off set by the reduction of future social welfare costs.

The Student and the School

Those students who experience any of these conditions within their lives, are at greater risk of obtaining an inadequate education and dropping

out of school. Unfortunately their level of attainment may well be somewhat determined when the child arrives at the school house. They may come from a home and community environment that often does not care about or know how to provide the necessary support to develop a winning spirit. Often they have already accepted a view of themselves as failures. They feel a sense of helplessness, in a world that often does not provide a caring and supporting environment. The school and individual classroom teachers are often the last opportunity to rescue these children from a unproductive and difficult life.

Within the school the most effective method for intervention is the individual classroom teacher. But as a result of the pressure placed upon the classroom teacher to deal with the ever increasing variety of demands from the individual learning styles within the classroom, more and more teachers are becoming concerned about the effectiveness of teaching strategies for all their students.

Educators, today, work in a profession that is experiencing great change. Teachers are reminded, by their administrators and boards of education, not to touch children, teach values, and take positions on controversial issues, etc. Such activities might result in legal action by parents or concerned community groups. Demands about accountability and student performance continue to plague the profession.

In such an uncertain and continually changing work environment many teachers feel that they are under attack. The real losers in such a situation are often the students who are marginal achievers, those students

who are at-risk with failure. Students with marginal abilities who seldom have others who will champion their cause. Those are the students that are often misunderstood by teachers, parents and peers. Children with low self esteem. Children who have accepted that they are failures. Children who have learned helplessness and practice it with perfection. Children who believe that success belongs to others. Children who have accepted their own worthlessness.

Students observe that the teacher wears the suit; the teacher sets the climate of the classroom. The best teachers are not always those with the most content knowledge, but rather those who are willing to risk themselves and care about the whole child. Often the child needs someone, anyone who will notice them and reassure them that they are of importance.

A few years ago, Dale Freeman wrote an article entitled, "I am bad, I am good, I am me," in the "Ozarker" column for the Springfield (Missouri) Newsleader [October 30, 1977]. Mr. freeman clearly presented an inexpensive, but yet key element for the success of all students. Positive encouragement.

I am bad, I am good, I am me.

I am Negro, I am bad,
I am poor white trash. I am bad.
My mother whips me to make me good. I am bad.
My preacher says the devil will get me. I am bad.
Jesus don't love me. I am bad.
I don't know what the teacher says. I am bad.
I don't understand her, so I don't listen. I am bad.
I don't know them funny black marks in my book. I am bad.
I can't make them marks stay on the lines. I am bad.

My teacher puts a paper on my desk. I don't know what to do. I do nothing. I am bad.
I make pretty colored marks on the paper. I like my crayons. It makes me feel good.
I want to show it to the kid next to me and tell him about it. I talked. I marked up my paper. I am very, very bad.
The kid next to me, he is good. The teacher likes his paper. He went to play with some trucks and blocks. I want to play with blocks and trucks. No! I am very bad.
I marked up my paper. Blocks and trucks are for good kids. Bay boys put their heads on their desks. I am very, very, bad.
I don't feel good. I make marks on that kids paper and threw it on the floor. It made me feel good. Now, I am very, very bad.

Who am I?
I run, I shout, I hit that kid next to me. I am Negro.
I am poor white trash.
I don't know nuthin. I don't listen. I am lazy. I don't sit sill. I mark on my papers. I hit kids.
I know who I am. I am the baddest kid in the room.
Everybody knows it. I am bad.

Today the teacher smiled at me! "Hello - I like that red shirt!"
I don't say nuthin.
I see some trucks. I like to roll them on the rug. She don't care. I roll them and roll them. That makes me feel real good.
I'll take them blocks and make me a garage for my trucks. I make me a good garage and put my trucks in it. I lie on the rug and look at it. I feel good.
My teacher says, "Tony, you made a good garage. You used red blocks. Let's count together and see how many red blocks you used. 1-2-3-4.
"Tony you are a smart boy. You can count!" I feel very, very good.

That kid next to me he wanted to make a garage, too. I help him. We made a garage. It was a big garage. We put a big truck in it.
The boy said we had 2 garages and 2 trucks.
We used some greed blocks. That boy and me counted . He helped me count 8 green blocks. I feel good.

Them funny marks says my name. I believe I can make one of them funny marks.
I made one on the board. I feel good.
My teacher said, "My, that is good! Some of these days you can write all your name. You are a smart boy. I'm glad you are in my room."
She likes me!
I say, "I'll make you 'nuther good picture, better'n that!"
Me and that kid next to me went out to play. He likes me!

Who am I?
I am a boy. I am good!
I am Tony. I am good!
I made a good garage. I am good!
I counted. I am good!
I know this is a red shirt. I am good!
That kid likes me. I am good!
The teacher likes me. I am good!
I made a pretty picture. I am good!
I know them funny marks says my name. I am good!

I made one of them marks. I am very, very good!
That kid next to me is good, too. We're two good boys.
I'm glad I'm me!

Fortunately for many of these children, more and more teachers are willing to take risk themselves and become involved within the lives of the marginal achiever and thus attempt to rescue them from a world of failure and self doubt. If the American educational system is going to save the at least twenty-five percent of its students who have too often been considered as disposable or throwaway, more educators and parents are going to need to take risk and become involved in the lives of children.

Effective schools research provides evidence that school size is important for meeting the academic needs of all students. The school with a smaller student population, generally has a better opportunity to provide the individual attention needed by the marginal achieving student. The school must have the necessary resources to provide the basic essentials of a quality education. Those schools which have the diversity in curriculum, an adequate support staff and a variety of student extra-curricular activities, yet are small in size generally are more effective with those students who do not achieve.

The size of student population is of most importance within the individual classroom. The fewer students assigned to an individual teacher the greater the opportunities for effective intervention strategies to deal with the marginal student. But the overall size of the school is also important. Extremely large schools provide greater opportunities for

marginal students to disengage and become lost within the school building and system.

Many elements are necessary for effective schooling for all students. Within the American school house there are and have always been a core of students who succeed, even with a lack of materials, inadequate facilities and ineffective teachers. Students who have the necessary skills, desire and motivation to accomplish at school and life. The students who achieve in spite of their environment, including their teachers.

Unfortunately few students have such skills. Many more children come to the school house without the commitment to strive against great odds. Many simply quit trying. It is those students who need effective schooling to meet the challenges of life. Efforts to provide those children with appropriate educational opportunities should include, parents, the community, educational leaders, teachers and the student.

Many of the future drop outs do not enter school ready to learn, because some or all of those elements are missing from their life. Unfortunately, early in their educational experience they are given pencil and paper and asked to provide evidence of ability. Failure is used by the school as a diagnostic tool. When a child does not measure up on paper and pencil assessments they are assigned to a slower group. Why, because educators believe they can provide more assistance to the individual within an ability group. But in the assignment to a group, the teacher and school may have just labeled and disabled the child. Many of these children suffer from a poor image of themselves and when the teacher and school uses

failure as a diagnostic tool such actions simply validate the students own perception of worthlessness.

Teachers often give more time and effort to the advantaged student and the less academic students are, at times, neglected or even rejected. After all, the advantaged student often presents a more positive attitude towards the teacher and education. They seem to have a desire to learn and the teacher may feel a greater opportunity for success. The less academic child receives fewer opportunities to master the subject and experience success.(46) Such situations result in lower grades which again validates the student's perceived inability. Those students then lose interest and become less involved in the educational process over which they have no control. At the end of the school year their records reveal a continuation of labeling, either through a written teacher evaluation of the student and their abilities or through grade retention.

As a result of the experience in school, researchers have concluded that many dropouts can be identified as early as the second or third grade. Indicators like reading achievement, non-promotion and over-age along with family characteristics and the socioeconomic status of the family point to future dropouts.(47) All students, especially at-risk students, need to develop a sense of belonging and be able to believe that school is a good place for them.

Retention in school creates an environment that produces students at-risk with failure. Research on grade retention have revealed evidence that grade retention is a primary indicator of future dropouts.(48) Students

who dropout are five times more likely to have been retained in a grade level. Most students who experience failure in the eighth or ninth grade eventually quit high school. Failure in the first and second grades produce an eighty percent dropout rate.(49) Being retained in any grade can increase the potential for dropping out by as much as fifty percent. Retention in two grades as much as ninety percent.(50)

Such experiences create the development of educational push- outs, students who are forced out of the system either because of their actual or perceived inability to achieve. Students who continually receive signals from the school that they are unworthy or unable to continue schooling, but do not become either dropouts or push-outs, are stay-ins who hang along the edges and fail to receive an adequate education. Failure within the educational institution and the byproduct of dropping out are unfortunately influenced by the school itself. Regardless, such students are at-risk within the educational system and because of that they are most likely will be at-risk throughout their life.

Whether students dropout, become push-outs or stay-ins they do not receive an appropriate and adequate education. The educational system is failing them. The American nation can no longer allow so many of its citizens to enter the adult work-world illiterate, undereducated and unprepared to become productive and responsible citizens. The international market place will not allow the United States to compete successfully with a fourth of its citizens failing to complete a high school education and as many as forty percent receiving an inadequate education.

The rural educator must build on those elements which are readily available. Often the rural school is small in numbers and thus provides a sense of community. What many of my kids need is a teacher who will encourage them to take risk and to try new adventures. A teacher who stands beside them and encourages them through the unknown endeavor. Ricky Van Shelton's song, "Keep it Between the Lines,"written by Russell Smith and Cathy Louvin, provides some good advice about encouraging others to take a chance.

He was set'n beside me in the passenger seat.
As I looked through the windshield, at the quiet little street.
He was smil'n so proud as he gave me the key.
But inside, I knew he was a nervous as me.
I said, "Daddy oh daddy, are you sure I know how?
He said, "I'm right here beside you and you're go'n do fine.
All you got to do is keep it between the lines.
Cause it's a long narrow road.
Only the good Lord knows where it leads, in the end.
But, you got to begin.
So, keep your hands on the wheel.
Believe in the things that are real.
Just take your time and keep it between the lines."

End Notes

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